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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000908

D FOR BARRY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/31/2013

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SUBJECT: TFIZ01: LEBANESE SPEAKER BERRI DISCUSSES SHI'ITE
RESPONSE TO WAR IN IRAQ

REF: (A) BEIRUT 896 (B) BEIRUT 899 (C) STATE 77620

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR VINCENT M. BATTLE; REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: AMBASSADOR MET WITH LEBANESE PARLIAMENT
SPEAKER NABIH BERRI MARCH 31. DISCUSSIONS CENTERED AROUND
AMERICAN-LEBANESE RELATIONS, THE WAR IN IRAQ AND SHI'ITE
REACTION TO THE COALITION'S CAMPAIGN, THE ROADMAP, AND USG
WARNINGS TO SYRIA REGARDING TRANSSHIPMENTS TO IRAQ. END
SUMMARY.

12. (C) MEETING WITH SPEAKER BERRI MARCH 31, AMBASSADOR
HIGHLIGHTED THE NEED FOR GOVERNMENT OF LEBANON (GOL) ACTORS
TO RECOGNIZE THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ANTI-WAR AND
ANTI-AMERICAN RHETORIC IN MAKING STATEMENTS ABOUT THE WAR, AS
HE HAD PREVIOUSLY WITH OTHER GOL LEADERS (REFS A AND B).
BERRI RESPONDED POSITIVELY -- "I AM WITH YOU ONE HUNDRED
PERCENT" CONCERNING THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUED STRONG
BILATERAL RELATIONS, HE SAID, ADDING THAT HE HAD TOLD THE
BRITISH AMBASSADOR THE SAME THING EARLIER THAT MORNING.
HOWEVER, BERRI CONTINUED, THIS DOES NOT MEAN WE ACCEPT OR
EVEN UNDERSTAND WHAT IS HAPPENING IN IRAQ.

"THANKS TO YOU, SADDAM IS A HERO"

13. (C) AMBASSADOR ASKED THE SPEAKER WHY ANTI-WAR SENTIMENT
COULD BE SO EASILY TRANSLATED INTO SUPPORT FOR SADDAM,
PARTICULARLY AMONG SHI'ITES, GIVEN THE IRAQI REGIME'S HISTORY
OF ATROCITIES AND REPRESSION AGAINST ITS OWN SHI'A
POPULATION. BERRI RESPONDED "NO WAY, WE ARE WITH THE IRAQI
PEOPLE," NOT SADDAM, ADDING THAT SHI'ITE PARTICIPANTS IN
ANTI-WAR DEMONSTRATIONS IN LEBANON HAVE REFUSED TO CARRY
PICTURES OF SADDAM. AMBASSADOR PRESSED THE SPEAKER TO
EXPLAIN WHY LEBANESE SHI'ITES ARE BOARDING BUSES TO IRAQ AS
VOLUNTEER FIGHTERS ON THE SIDE OF SADDAM. BERRI EMPHATICALLY
DENIED THAT ANY AMAL SUPPORTERS WERE AMONG THIS GROUP, BUT
DID ACCEDE THAT HE CANNOT SPEAK FOR ALL SHI'ITES (READ
HIZBALLAH). TO EXPLAIN ARAB ANTI-WAR FEELINGS TURNING
PRO-SADDAM -- THE SPEAKER OFFERED THAT "YOU ARE MAKING HIM A
HERO." AS FOR THE SHI'ITES IN SOUTHERN IRAQ, BERRI
CONTINUED, THE EXPECTATION THAT THEY WOULD WELCOME COALITION
FORCES AS LIBERATORS AND FIGHT ALONG SIDE THEM BELIES RECENT
HISTORY. FOLLOWING DESERT STORM, THE U.S. HAD TURNED A BLIND
EYE TO THE REPUBLICAN GUARD MASSACRE OF IRAQI SHI'ITES WHO
REBELLED AGAINST SADDAM.

IRAQ IS A PENCIL, ISRAEL A CANNON

14. (C) BERRI REITERATED THE ALMOST UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED
BELIEF IN THE MIDDLE EAST THAT THE FUNDAMENTAL REGIONAL ISSUE
IS THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, NOT IRAQ. "IRAQ IS A
PENCIL, ISRAEL A CANNON" SAID BERRI, IN REFERENCE TO THE SIZE
OF THE PROBLEM. ARABS CANNOT SUPPORT U.S. ACTION IN IRAQ
WHEN THE U.S. LISTENS ONLY TO THE ISRAELIS AND NOT TO ITS
ARAB FRIENDS. YOU CANNOT EXPECT THE ARAB WORLD TO ACCEPT
AMERICA AS THE JUDGE OF THE IRAQI REGIME, THE SPEAKER
CONTINUED, WHEN THE U.S. IGNORES THE INJUSTICES IN PALESTINE.
AS FOR THE ROADMAP, BERRI COMMENTED THAT ALTHOUGH ARAFAT HAS
AGREED TO THE CHANGED CONSTITUTION AND ABU MAZEN HAS AGREED
TO BE PRIME MINISTER, "STILL, SHARON WILL NEVER ACCEPT IT."

15. (C) BERRI RAISED SECRETARY RUMSFELD'S WARNING TO SYRIA

ON TRANSSHIPMENTS OF MILITARY MATERIAL TO IRAQ. HE OPINED THAT THE SECRETARY WAS ATTEMPTING TO DEFLECT BLAME FOR THE CURRENT COURSE OF THE WAR IN IRAQ. AMBASSADOR ASSURED THE SPEAKER THAT, TO THE CONTRARY, THE USG HAS BEEN ENGAGED IN A LONG AND INTENSE DIALOGUE WITH SYRIA THAT PRECEDES THE COMMENCEMENT OF HOSTILITIES IN IRAQ. THE SPEAKER REMAINED UNCONVINCED, ADVISING THAT, GIVEN ITS POWER AND IMPORTANCE IN THE WORLD, "THE UNITED STATES SHOULD NOT GO AROUND ACCUSING SMALLER NATIONS OF THINGS UNLESS IT IS CERTAIN."

16. (C) COMMENT: BERRI EXPRESSED VIEWS WHICH PARALLEL HIS RECENT PUBLIC STATEMENTS. IN RESPONSE TO SECRETARY RUMFIELD'S WARNING TO SYRIA, BERRI STATED MARCH 29 "THE REAL SMUGGLING ACTIVITIES TAKE PLACE IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION, FROM ISRAEL TO THE UNITED STATES -- ISRAEL IS SMUGGLING IDEAS THAT EMBROIL THE U.S. ADMINISTRATION IN IRAQ." BERRI DISCUSSED WHAT HE BELIEVES TO BE A FAILURE ON THE PART OF ARABS TO EMPLOY ARAB CAPITAL PRESENT IN THE U.S. TO INFLUENCE WASHINGTON, ADDING "I JUST HOPE I LIVE TO SEE THE DAY WHEN THE AMERICAN PEOPLE WAKE UP FROM ISRAELI PROPAGANDA." THE SPEAKER WAS UPBEAT, HOWEVER, ABOUT THE FUTURE OF U.S.-LEBANESE RELATIONS. HE SEEMED QUITE GENUINE IN HIS LACK OF ANIMOSITY AS HE REFLECTED ON WHAT HE BELIEVED TO BE CONSECUTIVE AMERICAN MISTAKES LEADING TO THE CURRENT STATE OF U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS AS WELL AS THE COURSE OF THE WAR IN IRAQ. END COMMENT.

BATTLE